

Jamestown Rediscovery

Archeological Cultural Resources Management for the New Millennium

Five seasons of archeological excavation by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities' Jamestown Rediscovery uncovered the lines of decayed posts that proved to be the remnants of the stockade fenced James Fort, the earliest settlement at Jamestown and the first permanent English settlement in North America.

The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) could be considered the nation's oldest archeological cultural resources manager. In 1893, the APVA acquired 22.5 acres at the western end of Jamestown Island, the site of the oldest permanent English settlement in America, in order to stop both river erosion of the site and vandalism of an original church tower and graveyard. At that time most people felt the actual site of the 1607 fort settlement had already eroded into the James River. Nonetheless, it seemed like a good idea for the APVA to mothball an area surrounding the one remaining aboveground remnant of the 17th-century town, a brick church, by building a protective concrete seawall to stop erosion and a grass covered park to stop agricultural cultivation. As Virginia began laying plans to observe the 400th anniversary of the founding of James Fort, the Association decided to take an archeological look at just what it was that it had been preserving for a century in the hopes that it could make a major contribution to the nation's birthday. In the spring of 1994, the APVA began *Jamestown Rediscovery*, a 10-year comprehensive archeological research and public education program. The excavations were intended to seek a better understanding of the extent, if any, of the survival of the first fortifi-

cation, the remains of the first church, storehouse, and settlers' "cabins." They were also to seek signs of craftsmen's activities within and surrounding the early fort and evidence of the native Algonquin influence on colonial crafts, buildings, life style, and foodways. The research also hoped to gain insight into the lifestyles of rich, poor, and non-English among the first colonists and the nature and growth of world trade reflected by the buried artifacts of the settlement.

These were not unrealistic goals. In only five excavation seasons, this research has shed light on every single one of the original objectives and, typically, uncovered a number of surprises.

But to understand the scope of the discoveries, a short review of the documentary background of early Jamestown settlement is in order. On May 13, 1607, a group of 104 men and boys backed by the Virginia Company of London chose to settle a point of land that was actually an island at very high tide, Jamestown Island. While Captain John Smith and others left Jamestown soon after landing to explore the James River, the rest of the council were left to "contrive [design] the Fort." By June 15, 1607, George Percy, one of the original settlers described the finished fort:

We had built and finished our fort, which was triangle-wise, having three bulwarks at every corner like a half-moon, and four or five pieces of artillery mounted in them.

Whatever its form and degree of sophistication, the "council's Fort" did not last long. In January 1608, fire either seriously damaged or completely destroyed it. Yet by summer that year it was rebuilt and the overall plan transformed into a five-sided shape. This newer "James towne" seemed to prosper under Captain John Smith's strict leadership, but soon after he left in the fall of 1609, the colony began to deteriorate. By spring, when a supply ship arrived with the first governor, Sir Thomas Gates, and his future secretary, William Strachey, they basically found Jamestown in a shambles: "viewing the fort, [May 23, 1610] we found the palisades torn down, the ports open, the gates from off their hinges." Soon things got so bad that Gates ordered an evacuation of the town. On June 7, 1610, "the survivors sailed down river.



APVA Jamestown Rediscovery excavations have recovered hundreds of 16th- and 17th-century iron military artifacts like this helmet. High power X-rays of these artifacts determined that nearly 400 years in the ground destroyed most of the objects' stable metal. Left buried and not removed archeologically to a modern museum conservation environment, they will no longer be recoverable in any form in the very near future.

Much to their surprise, however, they soon met an advance party from the incoming supply fleet of the new Governor, Lord Delaware. Thereafter the new leadership and especially the new supplies quickly seemed to rejuvenate the town. Strachey's next description of the fort is considerably more positive than his first and remains the most exact that is known to exist. Only three days after his return to the abandoned town, Strachey saw a fort of:

...about half an acre...is cast almost into the form of a triangle and so palisaded. The south side next the river (howbeit extended in a line or curtain sixscore foot more in length than the other two, by reason the advantage of the ground doth require) contains 140 yards, the west and east sides a hundred only. At every angle or corner, where the lines meet, a bulwark or watchtower is raised and in each bulwark a piece or two well mounted.... And thus enclosed, as I said, round with a palisade of planks and strong posts, four feet deep in the ground, of young oaks, walnuts, etc...the fort is called, in honor of His Majesty's name, Jamestown.

Removal of the upper foot of plowed soil by *Jamestown Rediscovery* archeologists in the yard south of the church during the course of five digging seasons uncovered a number of soil disturbances in the deeper clay that prove beyond a reasonable doubt to be the remnants of 1607-1625(?) James Fort. These early 17th-century features are part of the footprints of the defense work, including sections of two fort walls, part of a projecting corner defensive construction known as a bulwark or bastion and an adjacent outwork, one of the James Fort interior timber buildings, four backfilled pits, a series of ditches and postholes and two graves. The plowed soil and the fill in these features held over 250,000 artifacts, most dating to the first quarter of the 1600s. A surprising number of these objects were over 400 years old, including arms, armor, ammunition, pottery, coins, political tokens, and scrap from the manufacture of copper jewelry for the Indian trade, and glassmaking. The graves contained the coffins and skeletons of a man with a gunshot wound in his leg and a woman in a very poor state of preservation, both likely buried during the early occupation of the settlement.

Objects found that were used and thrown away or lost within the palisades are indeed old and military enough to be the signs of James Fort. Excavations uncovered three major artifact deposits directly related to the fort: two backfilled pits and the bulwark "moat." The pits and the moat were all filled at the same time, the datable artifacts in them all point to the 1607-1610 period. They all contained almost identical artifact types



including copper scrap from making Algonquin-style trade jewelry and fragments of delft pottery vessels that could be glued back together from feature to feature. All dated coins or tokens found in the pits, a total of nine, predated 1603. And the nature of the metal finds from the pits are exactly the types of things one would expect to find in a fort: a helmet and helmet fragments, a breastplate, other pieces of body armor, gun parts and equipment, sword and dagger parts, pike heads, powder cartridges, and ammunition ranging from small shot to cannon balls. Dutch political tokens may also attest to the military experience the English soldiers brought with them to Jamestown.

A cobblestone and brick building foundation was also found, east of the bulwark. Enough of the building was dug to suggest that it was 50 feet long and 30 feet wide with two chimneys on the west. A thick layer of ash inside the bounds of the foundation indicates that the building burned. Some of what appeared to be burned flooring was still visible. No artifacts have yet been recovered from construction deposits, but the lack of wine bottle glass across the foundation and in the yard area to the west suggest that it was built and burned sometime before 1650. While the excavations are extremely preliminary, it is tempting to identify this building with some commercial use, such as a storehouse, warehouse, or perhaps a customs house. In any

event, a land patent of 1644 fairly clearly establishes this property as belonging to one John White, a member of the House of Burgesses and possibly a merchant. In fact, a distinctive back-filled ditch aligned with the orientation of the foundation almost certainly marks the division between White's property and the land belonging to the church to the west. This ditch may prove to be the only property line that can be marked with any certainty at Jamestown thus making a significant contribution to piecing together the layout of the town.

The story of early Jamestown continues to become richer with each archeological season. But how is it that this description of total area excavation at Jamestown appears in a cultural resource management periodical? Is not *Jamestown Rediscovery* actually a dreaded "Phase III" process, usually reserved as a last resort for threatened sites, surely not to be used at America's buried birthplace?* In fact, in 1957, the pioneer National Park Service archeologist, John Cotter, recommended at the end of his heroic monographic report on the Jamestown excavations:

In 1957 systematic trench testing at Jamestown ended, it is hoped, forever. New field techniques...that detect underground features without excavating should be employed at sites like Jamestown—even if we must wait until the celebrations of 2007....

Magnetometers or such like, he reasoned, would let archeologists have their cake and eat it too, enabling them to access the archeological story without the inevitable disturbance of the ground.

Well, perhaps by 2007 there will be a device capable of detecting those all but invisible soil stains of earliest Jamestown. However, recent testing and follow-up excavation at the Rediscovery site show few signs of that on the near horizon. And even if some sort of precise ground x-ray could develop, only excavation with the traditional shovel and trowel can sort out the age and meaning of the features anyway. In other words, it is less likely today that technology will replace excavation than it may have seemed to Dr. Cotter 41 years ago. Shovels and trowels were the basic archeological tools before manned-flight was invented. Shovels and trowels are equally the basic archeological tools in the space age.

While no magical x-ray substitute for shovels and trowels seems within our grasp, another invention has indeed revolutionized the archeological process: the computer chip. While it obviously cannot move dirt, the PC certainly minimizes the destruction of archeological context by making it possible to micro-archive and analyze the excavation record. With a custom program known as Re:discovery for field/ lab text and images and total

station/auto CAD, the dismantled parts of James Fort can be preserved digitally far more precisely than the most meticulous records of the past. In that sense, the future at Jamestown is indeed now.

Three other arguments stemming from the *Jamestown Rediscovery* experience bode for re-evaluation of the "don't dig" school of CRM: the threat of time, an almost boundless site, and the crippling learning freeze. *Jamestown Rediscovery* excavations prove that in normal soil conditions at Jamestown metal and bone that have been in the ground for close to 400 years are within a few decades of the end of their survival. So a sizable percentage of the artifacts will not even be there to find in the not-to-distant future. Careful contextual removal and storage in a dry stable environment, however, arrests that decomposition. Also it is clear, based on the rate of excavation during the first five years of *Jamestown Rediscovery*, fully exploring the site of the earliest occupation at Jamestown would take 70 years. So even if total excavation goes forward from the 1990s there will be enough of untouched "Old" Town James for three more generations of "new and improved" archeologists. Add the rest of the Jamestown town site and it is clear that by the year 3007, archeologists might be able to begin to understand the settlement. And finally, if the excavations stop to wait for the perfect technological advance, how could desk archeologists gain the field experience at Jamestown necessary to interpret the discoveries advanced technology may offer? True the Rediscovery excavations benefited enormously from the experience gained by archeologists rescuing Jamestown period sites elsewhere in the Chesapeake region since Cotter worked. No one today could have recognized the importance of the ephemeral clues to early life at Jamestown including the not so obvious signs of the "fort" without the field trials of salvage work in the 1970s and 1980s. But the current excavations prove that there is no better classroom for the excavation of Jamestown than Jamestown. Thus as the millennium closes, the Jamestown experience suggests that the mothball approach to archeological cultural resource management, while it was a godsend in the 1890s, needs serious revision today.

* The National Park Service and other federal agencies limit Phase III, total excavation of a site, to those sites that may be destroyed or are threatened. Limited archeology to identify and evaluate a site is generally recommended in order to preserve the site for future study.

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Photos courtesy APVA.